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Comic Book Crime: Truth Justice and the American Way

By Nickie Phillips and Staci Strobl

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Reviewed by Angus Nurse, Middlesex University¹

Comic Book Crime examines crime, justice and law and order as depicted in American comic books, while simultaneously examining the manner in which complex criminological perspectives often manifest themselves as retributive or incapacitation narratives in popular fiction and media discourse. While comics' scholarship is a relatively under-developed area of criminological enquiry, Phillips and Strobl have produced an absorbing book which effectively straddles the divide between cultural criminology and the 'law and literature' movement. The book tells the story of an industry that has grown from its pulp fiction beginnings to become a primary source of material for mass market crime narratives, especially Hollywood cinema, while remaining true to its crime story origins.

Comic Book Crime is based on analysis of approximately 200 comic books sold from 2002 to 2010 together with the authors' own immersion and fieldwork in comic book fan culture. Thus Phillips and Strobl write not just about comics as texts through which criminological narratives unfold, they also discuss the importance of comics to an audience seeking to make sense of crime and law and order perspectives in a post 9/11 context. Banks and Wein (1998) identify that comic books (as fantasy based literature) 'are a safe and easy place for readers to explore parts of themselves and their sense of spiritualism and search from transcendence, and to examine and experiment with issues that worry or fascinate them' (1998:2). Crime is a perennial source of social anxiety, particularly for young males who have historically made up comics core audience (although Phillips and Strobl indicate that as comics have grown up so to has their audience) and the authors argue that 'the repetition of cultural meanings in comic book narratives often reinforces particular notions of justice, especially the punishment philosophies of retributive justice and incapacitation' (2013:3).

Comic Book Crime's analysis of comics' criminological themes considers not just how well they reflect contemporary 'real world' law and order narratives, but also the manner in which the comics community, a subcultural grouping of fans submerged in the minutiae of comics through podcasts conventions and forums, makes sense of and critiques unfolding narratives. In this sense, the events depicted in comics are real to readers expecting consistency in comics' interior world articulated through their weekly narratives; readers also expect consistency in characters' behaviour. This aspect of *Comic Book Crime* is a valuable contribution to cultural criminological scholarship, identifying and analyzing the complexity of readers' responses to character and story development and the criminological narratives on display. A significant strength of the book is the manner in which Phillips and Strobl use their discussions with comics' fans to reveal how 'non-expert' understanding of criminological theory represents a world-view that policymakers frequently

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misunderstand and misappropriate. In particular, the authors examine the notion of 'deathworthiness' discussing who should be killed as a function of meting out justice, and how much these judgments are influenced by the character of the hero, the function of the justice system (which in most comics would seem to be an extreme form of Americanised justice) and audience expectations. As Phillips and Strobl identify; 'empirical studies have shown that the death penalty is unlikely to be a deterrent to crime, and by definition, putting somebody to death cannot be rehabilitative or restorative' (2013:128). Yet their discussion reveals how comics fans consider some villains to be worthy of death given extreme levels of recidivism and the failure of justice systems to deal with persistent lawlessness. Phillips and Strobl (2013: 129) contextualize deathworthiness as:

- (1) the avoidance of killing with the possible exception of self-defense
- (2) the killing of those responsible for harms done to others
- (3) the killing of those morally depraved, for any reason, whom [heroes] encounter along the path to justice; and
- (4) the killing of innocents as collateral damage in the battle between good and evil

Phillips and Strobl identify that comics sometimes struggle with the use of deadly force and fan reaction to this is also mixed but an acceptance of the necessity of deadly force as a function of western criminal justice is evident. Matozzi (2003) identifies that comics have passed through both golden and silver ages where superheroes have been 'transformed, cancelled, revived, killed, deconstructed, reconstructed, revisited' (2003:1). One characteristic of modern comics is the emergence of grittier more vigilante-style anti-heroes, which reflects both the anxiety of the post 9-11 world and the need for appropriately tough responses to contemporary crime threats such as terrorism, government corruption and transnational organised crime.

Central to Phillips and Strobl's analysis is an appreciation of comics as a sophisticated art form capable of rivalling and even superseding the written memoir, reportage and 'real' literature (Versaci, 2008). Within *Comic Book Crime* they analyze issues of class, ethnicity, gender, race and sexuality and the manner in which these terms are constructed in comics' narratives as a way of producing meaning for the heroes and villains depicted in comics and the audience which consumes these narratives. In doing so, the authors identify both the conservative and progressive aspects of comics which reflect some of the difficulties inherent in contemporary society. Comics' depiction of women, for example, has always been problematic; particularly in respect of the fetishized nature of much comics artwork which arguably persists in portraying female superheroes largely as sex objects and has historically relegated female supporting characters to the role of love interest or victim. In Chapter 7 *Take Down the Bad Guys, Save the Girl*, Phillips and Strobl argue that gender is a fluid concept while noting that within the 'hypermasculine' world of comics 'females must negotiate their crime fighting in ways that express femininity in culturally approved ways' (2013: 141). Thus, while the authors note that contemporary comics explore possibilities in relation to gender and sexuality and depict gay and lesbian characters as heroes in a way that other popular culture media often fails to do, the 'white male heteronormativity of the comic book landscape' remains a dominating factor (2013:168). Similarly their chapter *Aren't there any Brown People in this World?* identifies how graphic representations of ethnicity remain stereotypical and

problematic. Assessing how minorities portrayed as heroes have often overcome criminal or anti-social pasts the authors observe that 'in the intersection between race/ethnicity and crime fighting, a heteronormative context that upholds a white, male, patriarchal perspective is prevalent even today' (2013:196).

Comic Book Crime is an important and engaging book of relevance not just to cultural criminology scholars interested in how popular media depicts crime and justice issues, but also to those interested in the complexities of criminological discourse and its frequent reduction into simplistic law and order narratives. While comic book fans may prefer more discussion of their preferred heroes and criminologists might prefer a more critical exploration of the complexities of criminological theory, the authors have produced an effective discussion of comics and crime which deserves to reach a wide audience.

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